

Assistance League Helps in “Sew” Many Ways

GROUP FUNDS 187 PROJECTS IN COLUMBIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Karen Cottrell couldn't stop staring.

There they sat, half a dozen beautiful sewing machines, gathering dust in a Douglass High School teachers' lounge. Every time she walked by, she peered inside, a kernel of an idea beginning to pop in her mind. She received permission to use them.

This past October, Cottrell had a wish granted (literally). The Assistance League of Mid-Missouri parceled out grants totaling \$98,391.56 for Columbia Public Schools as part of the Links to Learning program. Most grants ranged from \$100 to \$700. Three teachers were given the Neila Petit Award, the largest Links to Learning grant worth \$800. Among them was Cottrell, an English Language Learners teacher at Douglass. The sewing machines required fabric.

Cottrell wrote her grant with teaching her students entrepreneurialism in mind. She teaches English to older students who have recently immigrated to the United States. While Cottrell's main goal is for her students to acquire enough English to move to a normal high school or earn a high school diploma, she also wants to assure her students gain other useful working skills that could earn them money. While part of the day is spent reading and writing, her students are gaining rudimentary skills in sewing, quilting and clothing design as well.

“As a second language learner, it helps if you do something while acquiring the language, so the doing in here is learning to sew,” Cottrell said. “When I'm working with one group, half the class will be reading, dialoguing and writing, while the other half is at the machines and learning how to quilt.”

A former seamstress, Cottrell has been using the machines as part of her curriculum for the past two years. There are 12 sewing machines in her classroom that students use throughout the day. She uses online tutorials from Missouri Star Quilt Company and then gives an in-class demonstration. Along with learning how to work the machines, her students have also learned techniques such as garment construction, applique and rolled hem.

When she first began the program, Cottrell supplied most of the fabric for her students, but quickly realized she needed help. This year, the Neila Petit Award will help provide books, fabric and bus transportation to visit Missouri Star Quilt Company for her three English language classes.

“I constantly need fabric and I don't always want the fabric that your great grandmother had, especially when we're talking about making clothes. Times are changing and we have different fabrics available to us,” Cottrell said. “So that's a real big need and the other is having literature that they can read at different levels. That's why the Links to Learning grant has been really nice.”

Each English class has a different project it works on throughout the year. In her largest class, the students have worked on projects that include sewing patches and zippers, free motion weaving, and quilting an apron and a drawstring backpack.

Cottrell's beginning reading class is working on a project benefiting Starlight Children's

Foundation in Toronto, Canada. As part of their Ward + Robes program, nine of Cottrell's students are sewing and designing hospital gowns for teenage cancer and extended stay patients. Each student will make two gowns to donate and include a story they've written about themselves.

"I've always been a very project-minded and hands-on teacher," Cottrell said. "I've always worked with second language students, and my style of teaching lends itself very well to that because we do more than just talk—we do."

Cottrell says her students respond well to the integrated curriculum and she sees them progress on a daily basis.

"They're learning the English and using it, and they're able to take those skills and put something together and understand problems," Cottrell said. "I am deeply grateful for the grant and that this organization is trying hard to support the second language learner. It's needed and it really does make a difference in these students' lives."

Links to Learning is a competitive grant program that funds projects designed and implemented by CPS teachers. The funding requests are reviewed by Assistance League of Mid-Missouri members. Out of 255 received proposals, ALMM funded 187.